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THE YEAR OF THE JACKPOT by ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

Galaxy

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catch that martian

By **DAMON KNIGHT**

Easily annoyed? Maybe it's just

as well that you don't have the

power this character possessed!

THE first person who got on the Martian's nerves, according to a survey I made just recently, was a Mrs. Frances Economy, about 42, five foot three, heavy-set, with prominent mole on left cheek, formerly of 302 West 46th Street, Manhattan. Mrs. Economy went to a neighborhood movie on the night of September 5th, and half-

way through the first feature, just as she was scrabbling for the last of her popcorn, zip—she wasn't there any more.

That is, she was only half there. She could still see the screen, but it was like a television set with the sound off. The way she realized something had happened to her, she started stomping her feet, like you do when

Illustrated by **KARL ROGERS**

the sound goes off or the picture stops, and her feet didn't make any noise.

In fact, she couldn't feel the floor, just some kind of rubbery stuff that seemed to be holding her up. Same way with the arms of her chair. They weren't there, as far as her feeling them went.

Everything was dead still. She could hear her own breathing, and the gulp when she swallowed that last mouthful, and her heart beating if she listened close. That was all. When she got up and went out, she didn't step on anybody's feet—and she *tried* to.

Of course I asked her who was sitting next to her when it happened, but she doesn't remember. She didn't notice. It was like that with everybody.

NOT to keep you in suspense, the Martian did it. We figured that out later. There still isn't any proof, but it has to be that way. This Martian, the way it figures, looks just like anybody else. He could be the little guy with the derby hat and the sour expression, or the girl with the china-blue eyes, or the old gent with the chin spinach and glasses on a string. Anybody.

But he's a Martian. I don't see what else he *could* be. And being a Martian, he's got this power that people haven't got. If he feels like it, he just looks at you

cockeyed, and zip—you're in some other dimension. I don't know what the scientists would call it, the Fourth or Fifth Dimension or what, but I call it the next-door dimension because it seems like it's right next door—you can see into it. In other words, it's a place where other people can see you, but they can't hear you or touch you, unless they're ghosts too, and there's nothing but some kind of cloudy stuff to walk around on. I don't know if that sounds good or what. It stinks. It's just plain dull.

One more thing, he annoys easy. You crunch popcorn in his ear, he doesn't like that. You step on his toe, same thing. Say, "Hot enough for you?" or slap him on the back when he's got sunburn, serve him a plate of soup with your finger in it—zip.

The way we figured out it's a Martian was that it couldn't be one of us. No human can do a thing like that. Right? So what else could he be but a Martian? It figures. And nobody ever noticed him, so it must be he looks like anybody else. Some humans, they look like everybody else, but not because they want to. He *wants* to, I bet.

The way we know he annoys easy, there was eighteen "ghosts" wandering around when the public first noticed, which was dur-

ing the early morning of September 6th. That was about eleven hours after he got Mrs. Economy.

Thirteen of them were up at Broadway and 49th, walking through traffic. They went right through the cars. By nine o'clock there were two wrecks on that corner and a busted hydrant gushing water all over. The ghost people walked through the water and didn't get wet.

Three more showed up in front of a big delicatessen near 72nd Street and Amsterdam Avenue, just looking in the window. Every once in a while one of them would reach in through the glass and grab for something, but his hand went through the pastrami and chopped liver, so none of them got anything. That was fine for store windows, but it wasn't so fine for the ghost people.

The other two were sailors. They were out in the harbor, walking on water and thumbing their noses at naval officers aboard the ships that were anchored out there. It was hell on discipline.

The first eight patrolmen who reported all this got told they would be fired if they ever came on duty drunk again. But by ten-thirty it was on the radio, and then WPIX sent a camera crew up, and by the time the afternoon papers came out there were so many people in Times

Square that we had to put a cordon around the ghosts and divert traffic.

The delicatessen window up on Amsterdam got busted from the crowd leaning against it, or some guy trying to put his hand through the way the three ghosts did; we never figured out which. There were about sixty tugs, launches and rowboats in the harbor, and three helicopters, trying to get close enough to talk to the sailors.

One thing we know, the Martian must have been in that crowd on Times Square, because between one and one-thirty P. M. seven more ghosts wandered through the barrier and joined the other ones. You could tell they were mad, but of course you couldn't tell what they were saying unless you could read lips.

Then there were some more down by Macy's in the afternoon, and a few in Greenwich Village, and by evening we had lost count. The guesses in the papers that night ran from three hundred to a thousand. It was the *Times* that said three hundred. The cops didn't give out any estimate at all.

THE next day, there was just nothing else at all in the papers, or on the radio or TV. Bars did an all-time record business. So did churches.

The Mayor appointed a committee to investigate. The Police Commissioner called out special reserves to handle the mobs. The Governor was understood to say he was thinking about declaring a statewide emergency, but all he got in most papers was half a column among the ads. Later on he denied the whole thing.

Everybody had to be asked what he thought, from Einstein to Martin and Lewis. Some people said mass hysteria, some said the end of the world, some said the Russians.

Winchell was the first one to say in print that it was a Martian. I had the same idea myself, but by the time I got it all worked out I was too late to get the credit.

I was handicapped, because all this time I still hadn't seen one of the ghosts yet. I was on Safe, Loft and Truck—just promoted last spring from a patrolman—and while I was on duty I never got near any of the places where they were congregating. In the evenings, I had to take care of my mother.

But my brain was working. I had this Martian idea, and I kept thinking, thinking, all the time.

I knew better than to mention this to Captain Rifkowicz. All I would have to do was mention to him that I was thinking, and

he would say, "With what, Dunlop, with what?" or something sarcastic like that. As for asking him to get me transferred to Homicide or Missing Persons, where I might get assigned to the ghost case, that was out. Rifkowicz says I should have been kept on a beat long enough for my arches to fall, in order to leave more room on top for brains.

So I was on my own. And that evening, when they started announcing the rewards, I knew I had to get that Martian. There was fifteen hundred dollars, voted by the City Council that afternoon, for whoever would find out what was making the ghosts and stop it. Because if it didn't stop, there would be eighteen thousand ghosts in a month, and over two hundred thousand in a year.

Then there was a bunch of private rewards, running from twenty-five bucks to five hundred, offered by people that had relatives among the departed. There was a catch to those, though—you had to get the relatives back.

All together, they added up to nearly five thousand. With that dough, I could afford to hire somebody to take care of Ma and maybe have some private life of my own. There was a cute waitress down on Varick Street, where I had lunch every day. For a long

time I had been thinking if I asked her to go out, maybe she would say yes. But what was the use of me asking her, if all I could do was have her over to listen to Ma talk? All Ma talked about was how sick she was and how nobody cared.

FIRST thing I did, I got together all the newspaper stuff about the ghosts. I spread it out on the living room table and sorted it and started pasting it into a scrapbook. Right away I saw I had to have more information. What was in the papers was mostly stories about the crowds and the accidents and traffic tie-ups, plus interviews with people that didn't know anything.

What I wanted to know was—what were all these people doing when the Martian got them? If I knew that, maybe I could figure out some kind of a pattern, like if the Martian's pet peeve was back-slappers, or people who make you jump a foot when they sneeze, or whatever.

Another thing, I wanted to know all the times and places. From that, I could figure out what the Martian's habits were, if he had any, and with all of it together I could maybe arrange to be on the spot whenever he got sore. Then anybody except me who was there every time would have to be him.

I explained all this to Ma, hoping she would make a sacrifice and let me get Mrs. Proctor from across the hall to sit with her a few evenings. She didn't seem to get the idea. Ma never believes anything she reads in the papers, anyway, except the astrology column. The way it struck her, the whole thing was some kind of a scheme, like gangsters or publicity, and I would be better to stay away from it.

I made one more try, talking up the money I would get, but all she said was, "Well, then why don't you just *tell* that Captain Rifkowicz he's got to *let* you earn that reward?"

Ma has funny ideas about a lot of things. She came over here from England when she was a girl, and it looks like she never did get to understand America. I knew that if I kept after her, she would start crying and telling me about all the things she did for me when I was a baby. You can't argue against that.

So what I did next, I took the bull by the horns. I waited till Ma went to sleep and then I just walked out and hopped an uptown bus on Seventh Avenue. If I couldn't get off during the daytime, I would cut down my sleep for a while, that was all.

I was heading for Times Square, but at Twenty-seventh I

saw a crowd on the sidewalk. I got out and ran over there. Sure enough, in the middle of the crowd was two of the ghosts, a fat man with a soupstrainer mustache and a skinny woman with cherries on her hat. You could tell they were ghosts because the people were waving their hands through them. Aside from that, there was no difference.

I took the lady first, to be polite. I flashed the badge, and then I hauled out my notebook and wrote, "Name and address please," and shoved it at her.

She got the idea and looked through her bag for a pencil and an envelope. She scribbled, "Mrs. Walter F. Walters, Schenectady, N. Y."

I asked her, "When did this happen to you and where?"

She wrote it was about one P.M. the afternoon before, and she was in Schrafft's on Broadway near 37th, eating lunch with her husband. I asked her if the fat man was her husband, and she said he was.

I then asked her if she could remember exactly what the two of them were doing right at the moment when it happened. She thought a while and then said she was talking and her husband was dunking his doughnut in his coffee. I asked her if it was the kind with powdered sugar and she said yes.

I knew then that I was on the right track. She was one of those little women with big jaws that generally seem to have loud voices and like to use them; and I always hated people who dunk those kind of doughnuts, myself. The powdered sugar gets wet and gluey and the dunkers have to lick their fingers right in public.

I thanked them and went on uptown. When I got back home that night, about four A.M. the next morning, I had fifteen interviews in my book. The incidents had taken place all over the midtown area. Six got theirs for talking, four on crowded sidewalks—probably for jostling or stepping on corns—two for yelling on a quiet street at two in the morning, one for dunking, one for singing to himself on a subway, one, judging by the look of him, for not being washed, and one for coming in late to a Broadway play. The six talkers broke down to three in restaurants, two in a newsreel movie, and one in Carnegie Hall while a concert was going on.

Nobody remembered who they were next to at the time, but I was greatly encouraged. I had a hunch I was getting somewhere already.

I GOT through the next day, the eighth, in a kind of daze, and don't think Rifkowicz didn't

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call my attention to it. I suppose I wasn't worth more than a nickel to the City that day, but I promised myself I would make it up later. For the moment, I ignored Rifkowicz.

On the radio and TV, there were two new developments. In my head, there was one.

First, the radio and TV. I ate lunch in a saloon so as to catch the latest news, even though I had to give up my daily glimpse of the waitress in the beanery. Two things were new. One, people had started noticing that a few things had turned into ghosts—besides people, I mean. Things like a barrel organ, and an automobile that had its horn stuck, and like that.

That made things twice as bad, of course, because anybody was liable to try to touch one of these ghost things and jump to the conclusion they were a ghost, themselves.

Two, the TV reporters were interviewing the ghosts, the same way I did, with paper and pencil. I picked up four more sets of questions and answers just while I was eating lunch.

The ghosts came over fine on TV, by the way. Somehow it looked even creepier on the screen, when you saw somebody's hand disappear into them, than it did when you saw it with your own eyes.

The development in my head was like this. Out of the fifteen cases I already had, and the four I got from TV, there were eight that happened on the street or in subways or buses, five in restaurants, and six in places of entertainment. Four *different* places of entertainment. Now, at first glance, that may not look like it means much. But I said to myself, "What does this Martian do? He travels around from one place to another—that's normal. He eats—that's normal. But he goes to four different shows that I know about in three days—and I know just nineteen cases out of maybe a thousand!"

It all fitted together. Here is this Martian. He's never been here before. We know that because he just now started making trouble. The way I see it, these Martians look us over for a while from a distance, and then they decide to send one Martian down to New York to study us close up. Well, what's the first thing he does, being that he wants to find out all about us? He goes to the movies. And concerts and stage plays too, of course, because he wants to try everything once. But probably he sees two or three double features a day. It stands to reason.

So there he is in the movie, watching and listening so he shouldn't miss anything impor-

tant, and some customer around him starts making loud comments to somebody else, rattling cellophane, and snapping a pocket-book open and shut every five seconds to find a kleenex. So he flips them into the next dimension, where they can make all the noise they want without bothering him.

And that's the reason why there are so many ghosts that got theirs in the movies and places like that. On the streets of any city you can walk for miles without running into more than two or three really obnoxious characters, but in any kind of a theater there's *always* somebody talking, or coughing, or rattling paper. You've noticed that.

I went even further than that. I checked with my notes and then looked in a copy of *Cue* magazine to find out what was playing at each of those theaters when the Martian was there.

I found out that the play was a long-run musical—the concert was musical, naturally—and one of the two movies was a Hollywood remake of a musical comedy. The other was a newsreel.

There it was. I as good as had him. Then I got another idea and went back through my notes to find out where the theater victims had been sitting. The guy in Carnegie Hall had been in the balcony; that's where you hear

best, I guess. But the other five had all been sitting down front, in the first four rows.

The little guy was nearsighted.

That's the way I was thinking about him now—a little nearsighted guy who liked music better than Westerns, and was used to some place where everybody's careful not to bother anybody else. It was hard not to feel sorry for him; after all, some people that come from places closer than Mars have a hard time in New York.

But it was me against him. That night the total rewards were up to almost twenty thousand dollars.

I THOUGHT of one thing I could do right away. I could write to the Mayor to make an announcement that if people didn't want to be ghosts, they should keep from making unnecessary noise or being pests, especially in theaters. But one, he probably wouldn't pay any attention to me, and two, if he did, twenty thousand other guys would be following my lead before I could turn around, and one of them would probably catch the Martian before I did.

That night, I did the same as before. I waited till Ma was sleeping, then went out to a movie on Broadway. It was a first-run house, they had a musical play-

ing, and I sat down front.

But nothing happened. The Martian wasn't there.

I felt pretty discouraged when I got home. My time was running out and there are over three hundred theaters in Manhattan. I had to start working faster.

I lay awake for a long while, worrying and thinking about it, and finally I came to one of the most important decisions in my life. The next morning I was going to do something I never did before—call in and pretend like I was sick. And I was going to stay sick until I found the Martian.

I felt bad about it and I felt even worse in the morning, when Rifkowitz told me to take it easy till I got well.

After breakfast, I got the papers and made a list of shows on my way uptown. I went to one on 42nd Street first—it was a musical picture about some composer named Handle, and the second feature was a comedy, but it had Hoagy Carmichael in it, so I figured I should stay for that too. I sat in the fifth row. There was plenty of coughing going on, only nobody got turned into a ghost.

Then I had lunch and went to another musical, on Broadway. I drew another blank.

My eyes were beginning to bother me a little from sitting so

close to the screen, so I thought I would just go to a newsreel movie and then walk around a while before dinner. But when I got out of the newsreel I began to feel jittery, and I went straight to another double feature. The Martian wasn't there, either.

I had seen plenty of ghosts standing around on the streets, but they were all just standing there looking kind of lost and bewildered, the way they did after a while. You could tell a new victim because he would be rushing here and there, shoving his hands through things, trying to talk to people, and acting all upset.

One thing I forgot to mention. Everybody was wondering now how these ghosts got along without eating. In this dimension where they were, there wasn't any food—there wasn't *anything*, just the stuff like rubbery clouds that they were standing on. But they all claimed they weren't hungry or thirsty, and they all seemed to be in good shape. Even the ones that had been ghosts now for four days.

When I got out of that last movie, it was about eight in the evening. I was feeling low in my mind, but I still had a healthy appetite. I started wandering around the side streets of Broadway, looking for a restaurant that wasn't too crowded or too ex-

pensive. I passed a theater that was on my list, except I knew I was too late to get a ticket for it. It was the premiere of the newest Rodgers and Hammerstein show, and the lobby and half the sidewalk were full of customers.

I went on past, feeling gloomier because of all the bright lights and excitement, and then I heard something funny. Without paying any attention, I had been listening to one of these raspy-voiced barkers inside the lobby going, "GETcha program here." Now, all of a sudden, he said, "GETch—" and stopped.

I turned around, with a funny prickling up the back of my spine. The voice didn't start up again. Just as I started back toward the lobby, a ghost came out of the crowd. There was no doubt about him being a ghost—he ran through people.

He had a bunch of big booklets with slick covers under his arm, and his mouth was wide open like he was shouting. Then he showed his teeth, and his face got all red, and he lifted the booklets in both hands and threw them away as hard as he could. They went through people, too.

The ghost walked away with his hands shoved into his pockets.

RUNNING into that lobby, I shoved my badge at the ticket taker, and told him to find

me the manager, quick.

When the manager came up I grabbed him by the lapels and said, "I got reason to believe there's a dangerous criminal going to be in this audience tonight. With your cooperation, we'll get him." He looked worried, so I said, "There won't be any trouble. You just put me where I can see the front rows and leave the rest to me."

He said, "I can't give you a seat. The house is completely sold out."

I told him, "Okay, put me back in the wings, or whatever you call them."

He argued, but he did what I asked. We went down the side aisle, through the orchestra pit and through a little door that went under the stage. Then we went up a little stairway to backstage, and he put me right at the edge of the stage, up front, where I could peek out at the audience.

There was a crowd of people running around back there behind the curtains, actors and chorus girls, guys in their shirt sleeves and guys in overalls. I could hear the hum out front—people were beginning to fill the seats—and I wanted that curtain to go up. I just couldn't wait.

Finally the actors took their places, and the band suddenly started playing, and the curtain went up.

I understand that show is still playing to standing room only, even with all the trouble that's happened since then, but I didn't pay any attention to it and I couldn't even tell you what it was about. I was watching the front four rows, trying to memorize every face I saw.

Right in the middle there were three that I paid more attention to than the rest. One of them was a young blonde girl with blue eyes like the color of Ma's fancy china that she brought with her from the old country. Another was an old gent with chin spinach and glasses on a string. The third was a little guy with a sour expression and a derby hat.

I don't know why I picked out those three, except maybe it was a hunch. Maybe I was looking at the blonde girl just because she was pretty, but then again, I never saw eyes that color before or since. It could be that Martians have china-blue eyes; how would I know? I might have had some wild idea that the old guy could be the Martian and was wearing the frizzy white whiskers because Martians don't have chins exactly like us. And I think I picked on the little guy because he fitted the picture I already had in my head. And the way he was clutching that derby in his lap, like it was made of gold—I was thinking to myself, maybe he's

got some kind of ray gun built into that hat; maybe that's how he does it.

I ADMIT that I wasn't thinking very logical—I was too excited—but I never took my eyes off that audience for a second.

I was waiting for somebody to start coughing or sneezing and get turned into a ghost. When that happened, I would be watching the people, and if I was lucky I might see who was looking at the victim when it happened.

That's what I was waiting for. What I got was a sniff of smoke and then somebody started screaming and yelling, "*Fire!*"

Half the audience was on their feet in a second. I looked up, and sure enough there was smoke pouring out at the back of the room. Some more women screamed and the stampede was on.

The girls on stage stopped dancing and the band stopped playing. Somebody—some actor—ran out on the stage and started saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please. *Walk*, do not run, to the nearest exit. There is no danger. *Walk*, do not run—"

I lost my head. Not on account of the fire. I knew the actor was right and the only bad thing that could happen would be people

trampling each other to death to get out of there. But the seats were emptying fast and it struck me all of a sudden that I didn't know my way through that tangle of scenery backstage. By the time I got down the stairs and out into the auditorium, the Martian might be gone.

I felt cold all over. I didn't even stop to remember that I didn't have to go back the way I came, because there were little steps right at the side of the stage. I ran out from behind the wings and started to jump over the musicians. At that, I would have made it if I hadn't caught my toe in that little trough where the footlights are.

I had worse luck than that, even. I landed smack in the middle of the bass drum.

You never heard such a noise in your life. It sounded as if the ceiling caved in. Sitting there, with my legs and arms sticking out of that drum, I saw the people turn around and look at me like they had been shot. I saw them all, the girl with the china-blue eyes, the old gent with the whiskers, the little guy with the derby, and a lot more. And then, suddenly, all the sound stopped, same as when you turn off a radio.

The guy who owned the drum leaned over and tried to pull me out of it. He couldn't.

His hands went right through me.

LIKE I said, this Martian annoys easy. I don't know what he did about all those women screaming—maybe he figured there was a good reason for that and left them alone. But when I hit that bass drum, it must have burned him good. You know, when you're excited already, a loud noise will make you jump twice as far.

That's about the only satisfaction I got—that I probably annoyed him the worst of anybody in New York City.

That and being so close to catching him.

The company here is nothing to brag about—women that will talk your arm off and half your shoulder, and guys that say, "Peaceful enough for you?" and back-slappers, and people that hum to themselves—

Besides that, the place is so damned dull. Clouds to stand on, nothing to eat even if you wanted to eat, and nothing to do except stand around and watch the new ones come through. We can't even see much of New York any more, because it keeps getting mistier all the time—fading away, kind of, like maybe this dimension is getting a little farther away from the ordinary one every day.

I asked Mr. Dauth yesterday

how he thought the whole thing would wind up. Mr. Dauth isn't bad. He's a big, cheerful guy, about fifty. The kind that likes good food and good beer and a lot of it. But he doesn't complain. He admits that his habit of sucking his teeth out real loud is aggravating and says maybe he deserved what he got, which you'll admit is big of him. So I talk to him a lot, and the other day, when we were watching a new batch that had just come through, I asked him where he thought it would all end, because we can hear each other, you see, being in the same dimension.

He pursed his lips and frowned like he was thinking it over, and then said that as far as he could see, there wasn't any human be-

ing that was perfect. Anybody is liable to do something aggravating sooner or later. That's the way people are.

"And this Martian of yours seems to be thorough," he said. "Very thorough. It might take him years to get through studying the Earth."

"And then what?" I asked him.

"Well," he said, "eventually, if he keeps it up long enough, we'll all be over here."

I hope he's right. Now that I come to think of it, that cute waitress I mentioned has a habit of setting down a coffee cup so half of it slops into the saucer. If Mr. Dauth is right, all I've got to do is wait.

It stands to reason.

—DAMON KNIGHT

NEXT QUESTION

Evidently the news that Willy Ley was to start a regular science department with this issue, in which readers' questions would be answered either in the magazine or by mail, was just what readers wanted—the postman began staggering in with queries as soon as the announcement reached the newsstands. The volume of mail has increased steadily since then. This, instead of distressing us, proves to us that it is a recognizedly valuable readers' service feature.

We're happy. Willy Ley is happy. Those who are having their science questions answered are happy.

But what about you? If anything in science puzzles you, ask Mr. Ley! All we request is that you write your question or questions on one sheet of paper, and your note to the magazine, if you have something either complimentary or belligerent to say, on another. And—please!—put your name and address on both sheets.